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Peer reviewed

Vol. 31/2

2022

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ISSN 2412-2467



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JANUS PARALLELISM IN THE SONG OF SONGS

Polysemes, Homonyms, and Phonological Wordplays

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Abstract: In the Song of Songs, polysemy is a frequent poetic device. Even though examples of Janus parallelism in the Song of Songs have been observed frequently, there is a lack of systematic classification. This study applies a consistent and differentiated terminology in order to provide a more precise understanding of Janus parallelism in its different functions. Some words are not only ambiguous but refer to different roots with the same consonants, others need a vocalization different from the Masoretic text. Polysemes and homonyms are distinguished, homographs and homophones being subgroups of homonyms. Also, a special case of homonymy, autoantonyms, is explored. It is proposed that the examples chosen function as Janus puns relating the ambiguity of the word to the lines or natural divisions of sense. Their understanding depends on the preceding and subsequent poetic lines. They have a pivotal function for the linking of the poetic passages.

Abstract: Im Hohenlied Salomos ist die Polysemie ein häufiges poetisches Mittel. Obwohl eine Anzahl von Janus-Parallelismen im Hohenlied aufgezeigt worden ist, fehlt es an einer systematischen Einordnung. Diese Studie wendet eine einheitliche und differenzierte Terminologie an und sorgt für ein genaueres Verständnis des Janus-Parallelismus in seinen verschiedenen Funktionen. Einige Wörter sind nicht nur mehrdeutig, sondern beziehen sich auf verschiedene Wurzeln mit denselben Konsonanten, andere erfordern eine andere Vokalisierung als im masoretischen Text. Es wird zwischen Polysemen und Homonymen unterschieden, wobei Homographen und Homophone Untergruppen der Homonyme sind. Auch ein Sonderfall der Homonymie, Autoantonyme, wird untersucht. Es wird vorgeschlagen, dass ein Janus jeweils so positioniert ist, dass er im Leseprozess vor- und zurückweisend auf die Zeilen oder Sinnabschnitte des Verses bezogen ist, so dass sein Verständnis von den vorangehenden und nachfolgenden poetischen Zeilen abhängt und eine Schlüsselfunktion für die Verknüpfung der poetischen Abschnitte einnimmt.

Keywords: Song of Songs; Janus parallelism; wordplay; translation; poetics

1. The Song of Songs as Lyric Poetry¹

The genre of the Song of Songs has been widely discussed. There is an ongoing debate whether the Song of Songs is a mere anthology or has an overall structure, telling a story with a didactic intent. It has been understood as a drama written in verse and its performative character has been emphasized. Mainly, these interpretations refer to the overall structure of the Song. However, the Song of Songs is lyric poetry. The debate about lyric poetry as an expression of subjective experiences or fictional speech by specific persons can be disregarded here, as can the relationship between poetry and society.² However, the “brief metrical units, lines and stanzas, but also [...] the sound patterning of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance and the possible semantic relationships”³ of such patterning should be considered when referring to Janus constellations.

The Song of Songs consists of relatively short individual poems, most of which are spoken by one of the two protagonists, so that their situations and motivations can be reconstructed from their dramatic monologues.⁴ In this regard the smaller units of a poem are to be considered, because an important feature of the Song as a poetic text lies in words with multiple semantic senses.

In perceiving words with equivalent meanings, the reader decides depending on the syntagmatic context. Syntagmatic and paradigmatic elements of a text determine each other. The paradigmatic elements are exchangeable and may denote different nuances.⁵ The reader links a word to other textual units, often the stanza before or after, and decides on the appropriate translation.⁶ Usually, the reader selects a specific translation from one semantic field, as the context contributes to monosemy, but at times such propensity to single sense does not do justice to

¹ I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Sara Zhang, GETS, and Kevin Chau, UFS, for carefully reading an earlier version of the text and improving it by their valuable comments.

² For a general discussion on lyric poetry, see Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, Harvard 2015.

³ Culler, *Lyric* (fn. 2) 134.

⁴ See Culler, *Lyric* (fn. 2) 2.

⁵ See e. g. a study on “the kiss” shaped by the theoretical frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. Stefan Fischer, „Er küsse mich!“ – Sehnsüchtige Phantasien. Assoziatives Lesen als Annäherung an Hoheslied, *OTE* 18,2 (2005) 204–222.

⁶ It is the reader who gives meaning to a text by the means of selection and combination, as Jakobson states: “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.” Roman Jakobson, *Concluding Statement. Linguistics and Poetics*, in: Thomas Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*, New York 1960, 350–377: 358. – Translation is always shaped and constrained by the translator’s culture, gender, race, and personal history as his personal subjective reception history. See Susan Gillingham, *Biblical Studies on Holiday? A Personal View of Reception History*, in: Emma England/William J. Lyons (eds.), *Reception History and Biblical Studies. Theory and Practice*, London 2016, 17–30: 26.

lyrical ambiguity. In the following, I will present a study of Janus puns in the Song of Songs created by words with multiple semantic senses.

While it is obvious that the texts used in Janus parallelism and wordplay in general can also be evaluated in terms of their generic environments, or literary and social contexts, the focus here is on their function in the literary setting.

Even though examples of Janus parallelism in the Song of Songs have been observed frequently, there is a lack of systematic classification.⁷ This study applies a consistent and differentiated terminology to distinguish different kind of Janus parallelism. This will provide the reader with a more precise understanding of Janus parallelism in its different functions.

2. Polysemes and Homonyms

Sometimes the term “polysemy” is used as a generic term for different linguistic concepts of equivocation. In this paper, I distinguish between polysemes and homonyms as follows.⁸

Polysemes have the same spelling and derive from the same root. Through semantic shift they acquired multiple meanings.⁹ They have different contextual usages with related meanings developed by metonymy or metaphorical interpretation, so metonyms and metaphors are considered special cases of polysemy. Homonyms have the same spelling but a different meaning deriving from a different root. In other words, homonyms and polysemes differ in their etymology. Homonyms equate to the different roots of a Hebrew word, and polysemes to the different nuances of the same root.¹⁰ The existence of homonyms is arbitrary,

⁷ Biblical Studies on Janus parallelism and exegetical commentaries on the Song of Songs refer to Janus constellations rather casually. In his doctoral dissertation, Noegel focuses on the book of Job but also refers frequently to the Song of Songs: Scott B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job* (JSOTS 223), Sheffield 1996. He pays more attention in Scott B. Noegel/Gary A. Rendsburg, *Solomon's Vineyard. Literary and Linguistic Studies in the Song of Songs* (AIL 1), Atlanta 2009, 189–205. Also, Roberts examines the Song of Songs carefully and recognizes this literary device: D. Philipp Roberts, *Let me See Your Form. Seeking Poetic Structure in the Song of Songs*, Lanham 2007.

⁸ See also M. Lynne Murphy, *Lexical Meaning* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics), Cambridge 2010, 83–84; Gerard J. Steen, *Finding Metaphor in Grammar and Usage. A Methodological Analysis of Theory and Research* (Converging Evidence in Language and Communication Research 10), Amsterdam 2009, 141–142; Dirk Geeraerts/Hubert Cuyckens (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, Oxford 2007, 509–510.

⁹ See Gerhard Tauberschmidt, *Polysemy and Homonymy in Biblical Hebrew*, *Journal of Translation* 14,1 (2018) 29–41: 39.

¹⁰ These can be distinguished using varying gender. For example, a distinction is made between Edom as a people (masculine, more common, e. g. Gen 36:8; Num 20:18) and as an area (feminine, e. g. Jer 49:17).

while for polysemes a systematic development from a basic meaning is required. One sense can be derived from another. Both appear as homographs, with an identical spelling and pronunciation, or as semi-homographs, which have identical consonants but differ in pronunciation/vocalization.¹¹

Since we have limited knowledge of the development of the Hebrew language, it is most often impossible to clearly distinguish homonyms and polysemes. In fact, there is no agreement in scholarship to reduce the number of homonymous roots and interpret them rather as examples of polysemy or vice versa.¹² Distinct from but yet similar to these two aforementioned categories is the third category of phonologically based wordplays (*paronomasia*)¹³ in which a given word elicits a similar-sounding word on account of the context.

3. Janus Puns: Keywords with Polysemy, Homonymy, and Phonologically Based Wordplays

Unidirectional polysemy is distinguished from pivotal or multidirectional polysemy,¹⁴ often designated as Janus parallelism, deriving from the image of the Roman god Janus who has one head and two faces. He is the god of beginning as well as that of transition. Janus looks in two directions, often understood as

¹¹ Homonymy can refer to different concepts: a) Homographs are spelled alike (consonantly) but have different origins in root and meaning; often they may differ in their vocalization (e. g. דָּבָר “word, thing”, דִּבְרָה “plague” but also as a homonym “sting, thorn”, and דִּבְרָה* “pasture”). See Tauberschmidt, *Polysemy* (fn. 9) 35. Sometimes homographs are pronounced differently, then they are called heteronyms. An English example of heteronym is “desert,” which can denote the verb “to abandon” or “desert land.” For a list see <http://rinkworks.com/words/heteronyms.shtml>. In German, “modern” can be pronounced by emphasizing the first syllable as “to mold/to rot,” or the second syllable as “modern/recent.” The people of the city of Essen, “Essener” are pronounced with an emphasis on the first syllable and the members of the Essenian sect “Essener” are emphasized on the second syllable. For ancient Hebrew this is difficult to be verified due to the lack of vowels. Later the vowels also served to differentiate pronunciation. E. g., אָב with the vowel qametz means “father in law”, and is also a personal name of one of Noah’s sons (Gen 5:32) and for Egypt (Ps 78:51) but with a patach it means “hot”. See DCH 3 (1996) 247. – b) Homophones are words with an identical pronunciation but different meanings and spellings, deriving from different roots.

¹² For discussion see Tauberschmidt, *Polysemy* (fn. 9) 34, who points to the disagreement between common Hebrew dictionaries. E. g., the root בָּרַךְ is treated as a polyseme in BDB and TWOT and as a homonym in HALOT, NIDOTTE and ThWQ. HALOT and NIDOTTE treat more roots as homonyms while while BDB, Gesenius¹⁸ and DCH “list fewer homonyms and interpret words more often as polysemous lexical items” (38).

¹³ See the definition of *paronomasia* by Valérie Kabergs/Hans Ausloos as “a combination of words sharing a similar sound, but having a different meaning” in: *Paronomasia or Wordplay? A Babel-Like Confusion. Towards A Definition of Hebrew Wordplay*, Bib. 90 (2012) 1–20: 8.

¹⁴ Scott B. Noegel, *Wordplay in Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (ANEM 26), Atlanta 2021, 176.

looking both to the past and the future. When approached, Janus turns his face such that only one side is revealed. In a similar fashion, a Janus pun in a lyrical text invites a transitional reading process that decides the relation(s) between two phrases, which are often two lines of a verse. Like the god's face, it points in both directions: referring backward to previous poetic lines and pointing forward to subsequent lines. In poetics a Janus pun always requires a keyword with different meanings. The word in question has the function of a "hinge-joint" when it "parallels what precedes it with one meaning and what follows it with a different meaning [...] it looks both ways but with different faces."¹⁵

Polysemes and homonyms in general refer to different types of verbal ambiguity. In lyric poetry these two, along with phonologically based wordplays, may be used to generate Janus puns, which cast related lines (or stichs) of a verse in different relations. A Janus pun builds on these three types of wordplay, and a pun is developed through its preceding and succeeding poetic lines, especially in how it develops multiple ways of relating the lines concerned.¹⁶

3.1 Janus Puns with Polysemes

As lyric poetry, the Song of Songs has a multitude of polysemes. Taking into consideration the local context, some of them might also be understood as Janus puns. The following is based upon the usages of metonymy and metaphor.

3.1.1 Song 4:9¹⁷

- 4:9 a You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride.
 b You have ravished my heart
 c with your eyes // the glance of your eyes // your beads,
 d with one chain of your necklace.

The repeated verb **לִבְבַתִּי** ("you have ravished my heart"), using a privative Piel,¹⁸ expresses how much she has enchanted him. A feature of her charm is

¹⁵ Cyrus H. Gordon, *Assymetric Janus Parallelism*, *ErIsr* 16 (1982) 80–81: 80.

¹⁶ The ambiguity of a Janus pun can be expressed in multiple fashions. When it occurs in two stichs, it is an asymmetrical Janus parallelism; if it occurs in three stichs, it is a symmetrical Janus parallelism. See Scott B. Noegel, *Another Janus Parallelism in the Atrahāsīs Epic*, *Acta Sumerologica* 17 (1995) 342–344: 342.

¹⁷ The translations are by the author. I have provided a full translation of the Song of Songs in Stefan Fischer, *Das Hohelied Salomos zwischen Poesie und Erzählung. Erzähltextanalyse eines poetischen Textes* (FAT 72), Tübingen 2010, 23–38. There I discuss philological difficulties. Here, this is only done when it is necessary for the interpretation of the Janus pun.

¹⁸ Ernst Jenni, *Das Herz wegnehmen*, in: id., *Das hebräische Piel. Syntaktisch-semasiologische Untersuchung einer Verbalform im Alten Testament*, Zürich 1968, 274. See Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, Madison 1985, 135–136 for a discussion on different translations of this phrase. If the heart is taken, it has the effect that he acts irrationally,

introduced in 4:9c with the phrase מַעֲיִן. By metonymic extensions, the noun “eye” (עַיִן) can carry at least three meanings. At the first glance, we have a literal and a metonymic usage, either pointing to her eyes—their shape, colour, or beauty—or to the glance/sparkle of her eyes (9c),¹⁹ which responds to his heart in 9b. This scene portrays the man gazing at her, depicting, as the saying goes, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” As in Akkadian²⁰ the eyes might be a polyseme for the twinkling of the jewellery.

In the light of the next line, the glance of the eyes can point to the iridescence of the jewellery, alluding to the beads of her necklace in 9d (see especially the comparable usages as “twinkling/brilliance” in Ezek 1:4.7.16.22.27). Hence, this phrase maybe translated as “by your eyes,” “by one glance of your eyes,” or “by your beads.” This polyseme thus functions as a Janus pun with “your eyes” or “the glance of your eyes” referring to the preceding lines, indicating how she ravished his heart, and “your beads” making a reference to the following line, creating a parallelism to the “chain of your necklace.”

3.1.2 Song 6:12–7:2

In 7:1a–b [6:13a–b], the fourfold usage of the imperative שׁוּבִי emphasizes the urgency of the request. Two different translations of the imperative שׁוּבִי create a Janus pun. When שׁוּבִי is translated as “return,” it refers to the preceding scene (6:11–12). The woman becomes lost while she is in the nut garden and finds herself in the chariot of Amminadib. Now she is called to return. This reading is in accordance with the Vulgate, which takes the fourfold call to return as the closing verse of chapter 6 and not as the beginning of chapter 7. When translated as “turn around,” it is the opening phrase of the following poem. An anonymous group, possibly the soldiers (because of the military setting), or a choir (because

she has driven him mad, as Barbiero puts it; Giovanni Barbiero, *Cantico dei cantici. Nuova versione, intrudizione e commento* (Libri Biblici. Primo Testamento 24), Milano 2004, 174. A similar expression is used in Ancient Egyptian Love Songs. See the songs of “The Stroll”, Chester Beatty I (C1,1-C5,2), quoted and explained by Fox, *Songs* (fn. 18) 52–64 and his interpretation in: Michael V. Fox, *Rereading The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs Thirty Years Later*, WO 46 (2016) 8–21: 16–18.

¹⁹ The glance of her eyes expresses the dynamic aspect. See Othmar Keel, *Das Hohelied* (ZBK.AT 18), Zürich 1986, 130. The same dynamics are employed with respect to her appearance in 6:5. They are also common in Egyptian Love Songs. She catches him with a glance of her eyes like a person who throws the lasso “with her hair she lassos me, with her eye she pulls me in” (Chester Beatty IC 17,2), “She is / lovely of eyes when gazing. Sweet her lips when speaking” (Chester Beatty IC 1,2), Fox, *Songs* (fn. 18) 73, 52. The latter may also translated as “seductive in her eyes when she glances, sweet in her lips when she speaks”; cf. Bernard Mathieu, *La poésie amoureuse de l’Égypte ancienne. Recherches sur un genre littéraire du Nouvel Empire*, Le Caire 1996.

²⁰ See “Inu/ēnu”, HALOT (2004) 774.

of the poetic, dialogical setting)²¹ calls upon her to turn around to dance²² (7:1[6:13]). The spectators, probably soldiers of the military camp, then glance at the woman from her feet upward. They are gazing at her who is “like a line dance of the two camps” (7:1d[6:13d]).²³

If שׁוּבִי is translated as “return,” it is more like that her beloved must be assumed as the one who calls to her.²⁴

- 6:12 a Before I was aware of it my desire set me
 b among the chariots of Amminadib.
 7:1 a Return! // Turn around! O Shulammit!
 b Return! // Turn around! We want to gaze upon you!
 c Why do you gaze at the Shulammit
 d like a line dance of the double camps?
 7:2 a How beautiful are your feet in sandals,
 a daughter of Nadib!
 b The curves of your thighs are like jewellery,
 c the handiwork of an artist.

As the woman, with the help of the daughters of Jerusalem (5:8; 6:1), was seeking for him, now the man is seeking her and apparently calls to her to return to him. The identification of a Janus pun here depends not only on the immediate context but also on the understanding of the changing scenes. Since the call appears four times, one could perhaps consider the possibility that the first two highlight “return” and the latter two shift to “turn around.” Then the Janus pun

²¹ See Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Das Hohelied der Liebe*, Freiburg i. B. et al. 2015, 142. Similarly, Fox takes the speakers as the “girls of Jerusalem”; see Fox, *Songs* (fn. 18) 154. For the different options of a speaker see Stefan Fischer, *Who are the daughters of Jerusalem?*, in: id./Gavin Fernandes (eds.), *The Song of Songs Afresh. Perspectives on a Biblical Love Poem* (HBM 82), Sheffield 2019, 77–101: 90–91.

²² For an interpretation as a dance, see Fischer, *Hohelied* (fn. 17) 121 n. 51. Those commentators who do not distinguish between two scenes (a dancing scene and a call to return) usually accept only the second one, e. g. Fox, *Songs* (fn. 18) 157.

²³ J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs* (OTL), Louisville, 2005, 225 rejects the translation “turn around” since the verb lacks this meaning. Even if she might be correct etymologically, this sense is already embedded in the Septuagint. The Septuagint ἐπίστρεψε transfers the same double meaning “return” or “curve, twist, turn (oneself) towards.” Similarly šwb in the Hiphil can also have this sense of “to turn” (Prov 20:26: “He turns the cartwheel on them”). Roberts, *Form* (fn. 7) 262 summarises various linguistic solutions of those scholars who find an invitation to dance here.

²⁴ Landy and Exum identify the speaker as the man; see Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise*, Sheffield ²2011, 61; Exum, *Songs* (fn. 23) 228. Moreover, if it is the man speaking, then perhaps he may be following the woman’s steps to the nut garden (6:11) and from there to the chariots of Amminadib. For a discussion on the different options of the speaker see also Fischer, *Hohelied* (fn. 17) 149–152.

functions as a hinge/transition between two units. Hence it contributes to an overall structure of the Song of Songs.

3.1.3 Song 2:16–17

When the semantic tension of polysemy is pushed to an extreme, the special case of autoantonymy emerges: a single word that can carry two opposing meanings, depending on how the context is understood. Song 2:16–17 offers an example:

- 2:16 a My beloved is mine,
 b and I am his,
 c who is browsing in the lilies.
 2:17 a Until the day blows
 b and the shadows flee.
 c Return! // Turn away! Be like a gazelle, my beloved,
 d Or the young one of a deer
 e on the mountains of Bether.

The imperative **שׁוּב** (“turn away” or “turn around” [toward someone]) is an autoantonym: the two translations have opposite senses, and both can be logical choices.²⁵ The meeting of the two lovers is the context of this scene (2:8–17). After longing for the beloved, the scene ends with the fulfilment of desire. The lovers find the intimacy love demands, a state of being that lasts the day until sunset.²⁶ At this point, the lovers must depart. At the end of the day, when he is about to leave, she begs him not to leave her but to return. Naturally, the woman wants to prolong the time of intimacy. She begs him not to leave but to turn to her. She wants to retain and extend the bliss of lovemaking. However, the scene continues with the image of a gazelle: he had come like a gazelle (2:9) from a distance. Now, once the time is over, she begs him to return. If it is assumed that the meeting took place in secret, this secret would be kept if he returns home undiscovered. Thus, turning away in this scenario portrays his return to the

²⁵ Exum notes this wordplay as a double entendre. J. Cheryl Exum, *The Voice of My Lover. Double Voice and Poetic Illusion in Song of Songs 2.8–3.5*, in: ead./H. G. M. Williamson (eds.), *Reading from Right to Left. Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J. A. Clines* (JSOTS 373), London 2003, 141–152: 150.

²⁶ Among scholars there has been some disagreement as to whether this scene takes place at the end of the day, as I understand it, or the dawn of the next morning. Even if the darkness of the night would give an intimacy and the lovers at other occasions have met during the night, the present context demands the evening because the preceding verses took place in daytime. For the discussion, see Gianni Barbiero, *Song of Songs. A Close Reading* (VT.S 144), Leiden et al. 2011, 123–24, and more extensive Jennifer Andruska, *Wise and Foolish Love in the Song of Songs* (OTS 75), Leiden et al. 2019, 43–61.

mountains from which he came in bounding leaps (2:8).²⁷ Or she may be calling him to “return” to her because she is not yet ready for him to leave.²⁸

3.2 Janus Puns with Homonyms

3.2.1 Song 2:10b–13

- 2:10b Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one,
 c and come out!
 2:11a For, behold, the winter is past
 b The rain is over and gone
 2:12a The flowers appear in the land,
 b the time of pruning // singing (זָמִיר) has come.
 c And the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
 2:13a The fig tree puts forth its early figs.
 b The vines in blossom give forth fragrance.
 c Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one,
 d and come out!

The call of the man to arise frames this section (v. 10b–v. 13c). The statement זָמִיר “the time of pruning // singing” (v. 12b) appears in the centre. This passage is the quintessential Janus pun in the Song of Songs, noted repeatedly by scholars. Here the change of seasons is depicted: the winter with its rain has passed, the flowers are blossoming, the vines are emerging, the fig tree is producing fruit and the time of pruning has come. The noun זָמִיר can be traced back to two homonymous roots, זָמַר I “pruning”, זָמַר II “singing”.²⁹ Therefore, either the time for singing or the season of pruning could be invoked. In general, for v. 12b the root is understood as “singing” when it is read in parallel with v. 12c (the singing turtledove), and as “pruning” when it is read in parallel with v. 12a (flowers in the land).

The root “singing” is the more common one, and very prominent in the Psalms, often accompanied by an instrument (Ps 33:2; 71:22; 98:5; 144:9; 147:7; 149:3). Its usage is widespread in Ugaritic, Akkadian and other West Semitic languages.³⁰ If the reader leans toward this sense, the singing of v. 12b can be

²⁷ Exum, *Voice* (fn. 25) 150.

²⁸ There is a similar case of autoantonymy in 8:14, but there instead of סָב, the imperative פָּרַח is used. It acts as an autoantonym in its directions ‘to flee from’ or ‘to flee to’. In the context ‘to flee from,’ it would be a summons to flee from the garden (8:13), where the companions are. And ‘to flee to’ would have the double entendre of the mountains in the distance and the woman herself.

²⁹ Gesenius¹⁸, זָמַר, 303–304.

³⁰ Hermann Barth, זָמַר zmr, *ThWAT* 2 (1977) 603–606.

viewed as the celebratory response to the advent of spring (the blooming of flowers in v. 12a), and is further specified as the singing turtledove in v.12c.³¹ As a result of the subsequent imagery of a fig tree in v. 1, the singing is then associated as taking place in a vineyard and an orchard of fig trees.³² Moreover, זמר II “singing” fits well in a chiasmic structure of sensual perceptions, followed by a line that features the sense of smell:³³

The flowers appear in the
land. (12a)
Seeing

The time of singing has come.
(12b)
Listening

The voice of the turtle-
dove is heard. (12c)
Listening

The fig tree ripens early figs.
(13a)
*Seeing and Tasting*³⁴

The vine blossoms
give forth fragrance.
(13b)
Smelling

Alternatively, זמר I (“pruning”) in v. 12b can be understood as paralleling to both v. 12a and v. 13ab, that is, the blossoming vines and fruiting fig trees.³⁵ The LXX understands the homonym as “pruning” and translates it with τομή “cutting.”³⁶ The immediate floral imagery of v. 12a causes commentators to see pruning as at odds with the spring season because an initial pruning would take place before blossoming and a second pruning would take place later in the year.³⁷ However,

³¹ The turtledove is a migratory bird and returns in spring. The image of the revival of nature is often employed among the prophets, especially that of song amidst the blooming of the desert (Isa 35:1–2; 51:3; 55:12–13; Hos 14:6–8).

³² Gustav Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, Band I, 2. Hälfte. Jahreslauf und Tageslauf: Frühling und Sommer, Gütersloh 1928, 567.

³³ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Hohelied* (fn. 21) 83.

³⁴ The verbal form of זמר II carries the sense of “to make ripe”, perhaps “to make red” (DCH 3 [1996] 270). It might denote the fig becoming more visible as it ripens toward its dark purplish colour that makes the fruit more visible in its contrast to the green foliage. More often it carries the sense of forming the fruits by “ripening/sweetening” them. Ibn Ezra sets the example of reading it as “to sweeten”, which is adopted in many commentaries (e. g. Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth [Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes]*, New York 1970, 146, n. 13; Fox, *Songs* [fn. 18] 85; Landy, *Paradoxes* [fn. 24] 41; Exum, *Songs* [fn. 23] 121). Even if “to sweeten” impairs the chiasm, it still refers to sensual activities. Likewise, “the flowers appear in the land” (5,12a) evokes not only seeing but also the fresh smell of flowers in spring.

³⁵ The related noun זמר refers to the “choice fruits” (Gen 43:11).

³⁶ The Vulgate translates with *putationis* “pruning.”

³⁷ See Dalman, *Arbeit* (fn. 32) 420; Meik Gerhards, *Das Hohelied* (ABIG 35), Leipzig 2010, 390, n.16.

at the end of winter, there is an initial pruning, and in spring, there is another pruning of too many vine's shoots and surplus figs, to enhance the quality of the fruits.³⁸ Thus, the imagery of pruning in v. 12b can also relate to the imagery of the fruiting of the fig tree and the flowering of the vine after winter (v.13ab).³⁹

3.2.2 Song 7:12–13[11–12]

- 7:12 a Come, my beloved!
- b Let us go out to the field!
- c Let us spend the night in the villages // among henna bushes!
- 7:13 a Let us go early to the vineyards
- b Let us see if the vines are in bloom,
- c if the buds have opened,
- d if the pomegranates have blossomed.
- e There, I will give you my love.

The homonym **בכפרים** yields two possible translations, “among henna bushes” (cf. Song 4:13) and “in the villages” (cf. 1 Sam 6:18). The scene portrays the man calling the woman to come with him into the open field,⁴⁰ where they will spend the night. The place in the field to lodge for the night is therefore either the open space of henna bushes or the closed and safe place of a village. It is the place of lovemaking, where “I will give you my love” (7:13[12]). Fox claims that “the stich is another Janus pun, the first sense looking backward to ‘field’, the second ahead to ‘vineyard’.”⁴¹ That is to say, the first reading, “let us lodge in the villages”, would parallel the previous line, “let us go to the field.” But the second one, “let us lodge among the henna plants”, would prepare for the following line, “let us rise up early to the vineyards.”

³⁸ Cf. Isa 18:5; Roberts, *Form* (fn. 7) 112; Yair Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied* (HThKAT), Freiburg i. B. et al. 2004, 151.

³⁹ A modern reader of this text might read it differently because in modern Hebrew **לַיְלָה** denotes “nightingale.” “The season of the nightingale has come, and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land.” Hence, we have a parallelism of the birds in the garden: The nightingale sings during the night in early spring and the turtledove early in the morning. It is not inconceivable for the ancient reader to have had a similar understanding, but there is no lexical hint that such an understanding existed in ancient Israel. It is only known from the 13th cent. CE, see Zakovitch, *Hohelied* (fn. 38) 151. At one stage the beauty of the voice of a nightingale led to this translation as a polyseme deriving from **לַיְלָה** I. In 1996 coins were minted in Israel with quotations from Song of Songs 2:12–13 on the front and reverse to depict spring. The front shows a nightingale and the text “the time of the singing of birds” and the reverse a fig leaf with fruit and the quotation, “the fig tree puts forth her green figs” (<http://www.commem.com/prod05f.htm> “The Nightingale and Fig”).

⁴⁰ The noun **הַשָּׂדֶה** denotes the “agricultural fields, land outside a city and even national territories”. William H. Propp, *On Hebrew šāde(h), ‘highland’*, VT 37 (1987) 230–236: 233.

⁴¹ Fox, *Songs* (fn. 18) 164.

Now given the phonetic link (rhyme) between לְכַרְמִים (“to the vineyards [kěřāmîm]”) and בְּכַפְרִים (“in the villages/henna bushes [kěpārîm]”), the phrase cannot be read only with v. 12ab[11ab]. The vineyards of v. 13 must be included. Vineyard in the Song of Songs is not only a place in the literal sense, but a continued metaphor (*metaphora continuata*) for the woman (1:6). “Henna” (כֶּפֶר) appears twice in the Song: in the vineyards of En Gedi (1:14) and in the garden metaphor of the woman (4:13). If one reads כֶּפֶר as “henna,” then the lyric situation may be paraphrased as follows: the woman summons the man to come with her. If they go to the vineyards, then among the henna bushes she invites him to make love. Hence, the reading of “henna bushes” does not only refer backwards to the open field but also forward to the vineyards.

In contrast, a translation of בְּכַפְרִים as “in the villages” is a hapax legomenon in the Song of Songs. However, the Targum, the Septuagint and the Vulgate support this reading.⁴² If the word “villages” is understood literally, it refers to the countryside in opposition to the city.⁴³ Compared to the vineyards, the image of “villages” foregrounds the cultivated countryside. Hess assumes that such villages were without walls but would provide “safety from wild animals and thieves.”⁴⁴ If this is the case, the reference to “the villages” signifies the introduction of a new theme. When the Song of Song is read from a “narrative” perspective, this sequence (7:11–14[10–13]) is followed by a wish for lovemaking (8:1–3). A public street (8:1) and the house of the woman’s mother (8:2) situate the woman’s wish in an undefined location. While this location is assumed to be the city of Jerusalem (cf. 3:1–5; 5:2–8), it is also possible that it echoes back to “the villages.” The translation of בְּכַפְרִים as “in the villages” fits the context less easily than Jerusalem, but it is nonetheless a conceivable alternative translation, pointing to the countryside as the woman’s place of origin. There the house of the mother is situated.⁴⁵

In short, as in 2:12, the homonym is not a classic Janus-face but a double Janus-face. Though the reading of “henna bushes” fits the immediate context better, each translation would cohere with the verses before and after.

⁴² The Targum interprets villages in parallel to the highlands of foreign nations as “cities of the exile and the provinces of the nations.” Cf. Philip S. Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, London 2003, 186.

⁴³ See the distinction of countryside, cities, villages, and towers in 1 Chr 27:25.

⁴⁴ Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Grand Rapids 2005, 226.

⁴⁵ The house of the mother (3:4; 8:2) is in a dwelling place, in a village or city. While it stands to reason, it is not necessary to locate it in Jerusalem, which is where the king is located.

3.3 Phonologically Based Janus Puns

3.3.1 Differentiating Polysemes and Homonyms from Phonologically Based Wordplays

Not quite like Janus puns with polysemes or homonyms, in some cases Janus puns are achieved through a play on similarly sounding (spelled) words. Such play is typical of poetic texts.⁴⁶ For example, in Song 1:5 the vocalized text clearly speaks about “the tents of Solomon,” but the consonantal text can also be vocalized as “the tents of Salmah” (an ancient Arab tribe) which would parallel “the tents of Kedar.”⁴⁷

In Song 1:7 a shift in the pronunciation, depending on dialect, of תרעה may create a Janus with “desire” (paralleling what precedes) and “shepherd” (anticipating what follows).⁴⁸

Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you desire // where you shepherd/pasture
[your flock], where you make [your flock] to rest at noon.

Phonetic sounds open possibilities of interpretation that create an associative understanding in the reader, which will hardly find general recognition as Janus. E.g., “There may also be ... a Janus parallelism in ‘raven’ (עורב *Āôrēb*) looking back [phonetically] to ‘flowing’ (עבר *Āôbēr*) in 5:5 and ‘he passed on’ (עבר *Āābar*) in 5:6.”⁴⁹

This is not a Janus with a double meaning of a word but an association of the mobility of a raven with the flowing of myrrh from the hands of the woman and the departure of the man.

3.3.2 Songs 7:5d–6 [4d–5]

- 7:5 d Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon
e that looks toward Damascus.
7:6 a Your head // summit upon you is like Carmel // red-purple;
b and the streaming hair of your head like purple
c A king is held captive in the tresses.

The phrases רמשך and כרמל are the source for two wordplays of which the latter has more weight in the present discussion. The former may be read in the

⁴⁶ Tsumura provides an example and analysis of such in Nah 1:8. He argues that the MT spelling mēqômāh “its places” creates a phonological-based word play on the similar sounding bēqāmā “in the rebel(s)” which nicely parallels ’ōyēbāyw “his enemies” in the next line. See David T. Tsumura, *Janus Parallelism in Nah 1:8*, JBL 102 (1983) 109–111.

⁴⁷ For a discussion on the poetic effects of the one or other vocalization see Roberts, *Form* (fn. 7) 58. For additional information on the vocalization of “Salmah,” see Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AncB 7C), New York 1977, 320.

⁴⁸ Noegel/Rendsburg, *Vineyard* (fn. 7) 13.

⁴⁹ Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs. A Literary Analysis*, New York 2008, 225.

literal sense of “your head” and as a metaphorical mountain “summit.” The MT vocalization כַּכְרֶמֶל reads as “like [mount] Carmel”, but repointing to karmīl yields “like red-purple” threads.⁵⁰ If רֹאשָׁ is understood as the woman’s head, then Mount “Carmel” points back to the list of buildings or place names in 7:5[4] – ivory tower, gate of Bath-rabbim, ponds of Heshbon, Damascus, and the tower of Lebanon. Therefore, translating רֹאשָׁ as “your summit” makes perfect sense here, as it segues into the metaphor of Mount Carmel.⁵¹ One could expect that this list of place names completes in the final line “and the streaming hair of your head is like Argamon”(7:6[5] כְּאַרְגָּמֹן). No place with this name is known, but it could be a colloquial place name in the northern Levant. This remains hypothetical but may be considered in terms of the structure of the poem.

Alternatively, as mentioned previously, כַּכְרֶמֶל may evoke the phonologically similar karmīl,⁵² a red-purple cloth in parallel to the “purple” (אַרְגָּמָן) threads of v. 6b[5b]. Thus, the janus-based simile of v. 6a[5a] (כַּכְרֶמֶל) can also be understood as pointing forward to the descriptions of the woman’s hair that is described as beautiful on account of its comparison to precious and luxurious colours. As the colour “purple” is often used for luxurious fabrics (cf. Est 1:6), the suggested word pair karmīl and ’argāmān may also highlight the similarly attention-grabbing quality of the woman’s hair. Finally, one may read the combination of “Carmel” and “purple” as a parallelism that emphasizes the central idea of luxury. Carmel stands for the “most expensive real estate [...] in Israel” and is paralleled to the “precious material ’argāmān (אַרְגָּמָן) ‘purple dye’ [...] as a luxury good.”⁵³ Saying her head is like Carmel, and the hair of her head like purple, therefore, expresses how extravagantly beautiful she is.

4. Consequences of Interpretation

Ambiguity as a poetic device is integral to the Song of Songs. It is intended. But this also creates an immediate dilemma for translators, namely, how to transfer the ambiguity derived from polysemic differences into another language. The problem of making a choice between different options has the effect that for the

⁵⁰ Fox, *Songs* (fn. 18) 160 identifies this stich as a Janus pun. See 2 Chr 2:6[7] for the plene spelling (karmīl) of “red-purple”; Noegel/Rendsburg, *Vineyard* (fn. 7) 203.

⁵¹ “The metaphor moves from BODY FEATURES are like BUILDINGS to BODY FEATURES are like a LANDSCAPE, yet it is still referring to the SHAPE”. Stefan Fischer, *Mental mapping in the admiration song of Song of Songs 7:2–7*, HTS 75,3 (2019) 1–7: 5.

⁵² Gordis additionally argues that it originally was a common noun, “the purple land,” which is a proper name for Carmel. See Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations. A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, New York 1974, 94.

⁵³ Hunt, *Poetry* (fn. 49) 234.

common reader, the presence of multivalence is negated. Opting for unambiguous meaning is to impoverish the text. An exegetical translation would make the text easier to understand, but it follows the idea of translation based on dynamic equivalency. This highly interpretive approach is not suitable if the translator desires a translation that attempts to be close to the original.⁵⁴ More difficult to render is the vagueness of the words if both a literal and a metaphorical meaning are possible. Yet, it must be acknowledged that, especially in poetic texts, one often finds it difficult to render wordplay or puns in translation.⁵⁵ Since not every context allows the use of footnotes, which can provide secondary translations,⁵⁶ utilizing double in-text translations (as this paper has presented with the use of two slashes //) may offer an acceptable alternative and deserves more use. Though perhaps disruptive to the reader, as it disturbs the aesthetic purpose of lyric poetry, it does create the desired effect of semantic polyvalence.

The polysemes, homonyms, and phonologically based wordplays chosen for analysis in this paper are such that they also have a poetic function as Janus puns. Naturally, Janus puns contribute to the lyric structure of the Song of Songs.⁵⁷ They act as hinges that structure and link smaller units, as it is also known in those texts that show a mirroring structure (2:6; 6:13).⁵⁸ Moreover, if the overall structure of the Song of Songs is taken into account, it may be argued that Janus puns contribute to the formation of a linear structure of the book. This is evident in the macro-unit 6:4–7:11, where the Janus pun (7:1) links two formerly unrelated units.⁵⁹ As mentioned above, Janus puns derive from the paradigmatic aspect of poetics, but they also provide a handy structural assistance. In the case of Song of Songs, a linear and literal reading allows Janus puns to contribute to the interpretative richness of the Song of Songs.

⁵⁴ Felber emphasizes that the structure and the final shape of the Hebrew text need to be preserved in a translation. See Stefan Felber, *Kommunikative Bibelübersetzung*. Eugene A. Nida und sein Modell der dynamischen Äquivalenz, Stuttgart 2013, 382. Charles F. Burney, *Old Testament Notes*, JThS 10 (1909) 580–589: 584–587 tries to reproduce rhyme and rhythm of Song of Songs in English.

⁵⁵ Noegel has shown that this was the method the ancient translations tried to preserve the polysemy. See Noegel, *Job* (fn. 7) 140–143.

⁵⁶ Bertil Albrektson, *Singing or Pruning*, BiTr 47 (1996) 109–114: 109, deals with the problem of translation in the Swedish bible. He suggests putting one translation in the text and the other in the footnote if both are possible and fit the context.

⁵⁷ I have proposed previously that the Song of Songs contains linear, concentric, and cyclic structures. See Fischer, *Hohelied* (fn. 17) 54–87.

⁵⁸ See Fischer, *Hohelied* (fn. 17) 136. Cf. M. Timothea Elliott, *The Literary Unity of the Canticle* (EHS.T 371), Frankfurt 1989, 226–228.

⁵⁹ Fischer, *Hohelied* (fn. 17) 150.

In the interpretive process, the reader might lean toward a particular reading, yet the human brain enables the recognition and appreciation of more than one reading at the same time, especially when different types of figurative meanings are involved. The lyrical effect of Janus puns is ultimately realized in the reader who grasps a concentric structure and links a word in both directions of the literary text. Polysemes and homonyms stand at the interface between semantics and cognition, especially in a love song where vagueness and ambiguity correspond with the nature of loving emotions.